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## Use Automated Phone Calls to Relay Extension Educational Messages

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**Abstract:** West Virginia University (WVU) Extension agents expanded a community-based program for older adults by adding an automated phone call component. Senior participants who attended one or more Taking Charge of Your Health and Safety programs elected to receive follow-up health tips by phone. The automated calls were an efficient, cost-effective, and popular way to relay research-based health information. Automated calls may be useful with a variety of programs across many disciplines.

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## Introduction

Extension educators are known in their communities for delivering research-based information to many audiences. In the past, several states have used automated recorded messages in the form of a hotline to answer frequently asked questions (Newman, 1999). Recorded messages answering frequently asked questions were made available for clients to access. It appeared to be a valuable method to reach people, especially those who live in rural areas and lack health resources (Epstein, 1985).

The high proportion of West Virginia seniors living in rural communities, as well as the lack of access to health information, led to the creation of a program that used a slightly different approach. "Calling for Your Health" had several WVU Extension agents calling participants after a face-to-face program using automated telephone messages.

## Automated Calling

Many automated call providers, with similar plans and pricing, are available for use by Extension professionals.

Depending on the audience, budget, and message, automated messages could be a great addition to traditional Extension programming. Automated calling and texting allow Extension personnel to record a message once and reach many people in less time. It is time-saving and cost-effective. The WVU program used a website to record and disseminate health tips to seniors. This particular site allows pay-as-you-go or monthly payment plans for voice and text.

In general, the pay-as-you-go plans start at a low "per call or text" rate and decrease as the number of calls or texts purchased increases. The monthly plans are normally based on the number of phone numbers stored in the system, thus making the "per call" price decrease as the number of calls made per month increases. Many providers have unlimited calling plans starting at low monthly rates. WVU used an unlimited monthly plan costing \$102.50 for 600 phone numbers. Four calls were made to each phone number per month, making the "per call" price less than 4.5 cents.

Most automated message providers allow users to choose an automatic phone call, text, or both. Texting is a popular way to reach teenagers or young adults, and it could be an innovative addition to Extension programming. With unlimited subgroups, many providers allow separate lists for each program, event, workshop, or activity.

Using automated calling or texting can save the time of personally trying to reach each participant as well as the money involved in sending letters or reminders by mail.

## How WVU Used the Call System

Senior participants were identified through a face-to-face health-related workshop called "Taking Charge of Your Health and Safety." Participants elected to receive follow-up health tips by phone that coincided with

the material they received at the educational program.

The call system was very simple to use.

- Scripts were first written by Extension agents participating in the program and included information for seniors on being active, eating smart, keeping the heart healthy, managing diabetes, dealing with arthritis, and preventing falls. Topics focused on seasonal and timely messages relevant to older adults. Each script was approximately 1 to 1 ½ minutes long when read aloud.
- The calls were scheduled and recorded using the automated system. After uploading participants' phone numbers into the computerized system, Extension agents followed prompts to schedule and then record the messages via phone.
- Agents could record as many messages at a time as they chose. The calls could be reviewed for accuracy and be rerecorded if necessary. The messages were then saved until the date of the scheduled call.
- WVU Extension agents' messages were received by seniors every Monday at 10:00 a.m., because this was the time identified by most seniors as convenient.
- Because the participants had previous contact with the Extension agent, the voice was familiar. A standard introduction at the beginning of each call identified the Extension agent, making it clear to the participants that it was not a telemarketer, but someone that they knew.
- Participant options for receiving calls included:
  1. Listen to the "health tip."
  2. Save the message on the answering machine for future reference.
  3. Opt out of the call and future calls by selecting a particular button on the phone.

## **How Other Extension Professionals Can Use Automated Calling**

Automated phone or text messages could potentially be used in a variety of ways by Extension educators. It is important for Extension educators to recognize the best way to reach target audiences. Seniors may be comfortable with phone messages, while younger audiences may be more receptive to text messaging.

Extension educators may use automated messaging to:

- Remind staff, volunteers, or participants about meetings, classes, events, cancellations, or other

important updates.

- Give gardening, pruning, and planting tips and reminders.
- Survey 4-H members on potential events or camp themes.
- Relay health tips related to specific areas, such as diabetes, healthy eating, or exercise.
- Encourage 4-H members to complete project books and attend project workshops.
- Give a healthy recipe of the week.
- Disseminate new information on pesticides or agricultural products and prices.
- Deliver food safety and cooking tips.
- Relay parenting information, such as tips for new moms.
- Promote new or upcoming classes.

Future plans for this strategy include implementing automated calling or texting into the Dining with Diabetes program. Participants will receive weekly class reminders and follow-up diabetes management tips continually until the follow-up class 3 months later.

## Conclusion

Automated messages can save time and be cost-effective in reaching a large audience. WVU used the automated calling system to reach seniors with health tips. There are additional ways Extension professionals may use automated call systems. This strategy offers numerous benefits to both the local Extension service and its constituents, including enhanced relationships, visibility, and expanded outreach to isolated or underserved audiences.

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